

# BOUNTY OF BONES

## Shed Hunting in North Dakota

By Sandra Hagen



CHRIS GRONDAHL

### *The race is on.*

She sees it initially, but the rule is whoever reaches it first claims it, and I've got maybe a two-second advantage from the front seat of the scoria-dusted Chevy. The passenger side

doors open and we're off. I can hear her feet hitting prairie two steps behind. Suddenly, I'm lying on the ground, with both hands secured around the prize, but she's got a grip, too. She tries to yank it out of my hands, pulling me across the uneven ground.

Finally, I give in – she did see it first, after all.

Sisters struggling over an antler dropped by a mule deer buck is definitely not something you see everyday.

We're in the badlands in western North Dakota on a picture-perfect day in April. My sister and I, and our two shed-hunting partners, have just finished hiking up and down grassy buttes and zigzagging through woody draws in search of sheds. Our reward to that point was a couple of spindly, three-point mule deer antlers.

Driving to our next spot, my sister spied a shed in short grass just a short sprint off the road. This time it was a heavy three-pointer, well worth the stickers I would later pick out of my arm after our race to claim.

All animals of the family *Cervidae*, including deer, elk and moose, shed antlers developed for the mating season. As an antler grows, it is covered with skin, or velvet, packed with blood vessels, which supply oxygen and nutrients. Once the antler reaches maximum size, which depends on the animal's age and health before and during antler growth, the velvet is lost and the bone dies. This dead bone is the antler, often dubbed "horns."

*A white-tailed buck with one antler gone and one to go.*



CRAIG BIRHLE



However, one must take caution in the reference as antlers and horns are not the same thing. Horns are comprised of keratin, which is the same stuff in hair, nails, claws or bird feathers. Animals of the family *Bovidae*, including bison, sheep and cattle, have horns that grow continuously throughout life, and are never shed.

Shed hunting is yet another way of enjoying the great outdoors. It's something to do during that time of year when upland game hunting is closed and it's too early to take the boat out. Deer, elk and moose shed their antlers after the mating season, sometimes as early as late December. The dedicated will begin looking for sheds when the ground is still coated in snow. My favorite time to go is after the snow has melted, on a 50-degree, early spring day that feels more like 75. The migrating birds are back, filling the departing winter air with spring chatter. Even if no sheds are found, there are no regrets on spending time outdoors on a day like this.

Shed hunting shows no favoritism – it's an activity anyone can enjoy. It may sound silly, but the excitement you feel when finding discarded bone, even if it's just a spindly three-pointer, is intense. Maybe you've walked a couple of miles and every angled stick begins to take on the look of a shed, teasing you to come closer and kick away winter's detritus for closer inspection. Then, one appears just steps away, neatly tucked under leaves, its tips shinning in the sun. The discovery will make anyone, regardless of age, hold their find proudly in the air and shout out a "woo hoo."

*It's many times a race to find buck sheds before the rodents do.*



CRAIG BIEHRLE

North Dakota is a big state, so where does one even begin to look for sheds? Start in the area where you hunt deer with gun or bow. While slowly poking around familiar country looking for sheds, you'll likely learn more about the area you hunt and how animals are using it. Be sure to check south-facing slopes where, only weeks earlier, deer bathed in winter's sun. Walking fence lines may turn up sheds because as the animal jumps to the other side, the impact of hitting ground may free an already loose antler. Search around trees, too, where low-hanging branches can sweep wobbly bone from a buck's head.

Shed hunting, in a sense, is a race against time. Discarded antlers don't last forever in nature, as squirrels, porcupines, rabbits and other small mammals chew on the fallen bone for its calcium. If a shed drops in direct sunlight, it will deteriorate over time.

Collecting sheds is legal in North Dakota, except within national parks, national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas. However, cutting the antlers off road-kill, or a dead deer you stumble upon in the field, is not legal. Even if you find an old skull, bleached and cracked from the weather, leave it there. "Antlers attached to the skull cannot be possessed without a permit from the North Dakota Game and Fish Department," said Brent Schwan, Department game warden, Watford City. "Department policy won't allow issue of permits for elk, moose or bighorn sheep, but in the right circumstances we will issue permits for deer."



SANDRA HAGEN

*A tired shed hunter catches a piggyback ride in the badlands.*

Department officials are often asked what harm it does to cut antlers off a dead buck. If this law were not in place, a person might shoot a nice buck before hunting season and return a few months later to "find" the dead deer, only to take the rack. The deer was poached, but the person could claim they just happened to find it and keep the rack, no license required. Or, what if a bowhunter shoots a buck at sunset and waits until first light to track it. If another person finds the dead deer before the bowhunter does, they could claim it instead, with a dispute to follow. The law requiring big game animals to be tagged immediately protects our wildlife from poaching and such conflicts.

So, what can a person do with sheds? A shed can add some outdoors to your indoor décor by placing it on its side so it wraps around hunting pictures, or use one to fill that empty space on a bookshelf. For some, every shed has a story – what year it was found, how it was spotted with binoculars, the big hill they had to climb to get it, or how it was found in the same area as another shed that displays the same physical characteristics, leading one to believe it could be from the same buck.

Sheds hold memories of time spent outdoors. The shed my sister and I raced for has one that will never be forgotten.

**SANDRA HAGEN** is a Game and Fish Department nongame biologist.